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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000063

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [GB](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: MFA REGREST GABON'S OVERREACTION TO CRITICISM

REF: A. LIBREVILLE 16

[1](#)B. LIBREVILLE 9

Classified By: Political Counselor Andrew Young, 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Gabonese are overreacting to criticism expressed by dissidents and centered on alleged corruption on the part of GOG officials, MFA desk officer Claude Blevin said on January 14. The Gabonese have been quick to see a French hand in support of the dissidents but this was not the case; part of the Gabonese misunderstanding stems from a refusal to believe in the independence of the French judiciary and its openness to anyone's filing a lawsuit, as several parties had done with respect to Gabon and other African countries. Gabonese ire in the present case has been stoked by the direct involvement of a Gabonese citizen and by the open letter against President Bongo published by Bruno Ben Moubamba. The French are not trying to interfere in Gabon's judicial process but are advising the Gabonese to adhere to their own legal procedures and to respect human rights. Blevin was unable to provide information on a separate controversy with a connection to Gabon involving FM Kouchner's alleged attempts to collect overdue fees associated with his activities prior to assuming office. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) MFA Gabon desk officer Claude Blevin on January 14 briefed on the current friction between France and Gabon (reftels). He said that this friction arose because of the GOG's inability to tolerate criticism of President Bongo, especially with respect to alleged corruption. A series of lawsuits filed in France accusing Bongo and other African leaders of corruption had served as the vehicle for such criticism. Blevin said that there had been three lawsuits filed in recent years against Bongo and other leaders for corruption and for using ill-gotten gains to acquire properties in France and elsewhere. The first suit was brought in France in July 2007 by several NGOs against Bongo, and Presidents Sassou-Nguesso (ROC), Obiang (Equatorial Guinea), Campaore (Burkina Faso), and Dos Santos (Angola). Another one followed in March 2008, against the same parties. Both suits were eventually dismissed.

[1](#)3. (C) The present case, and the basis for the current spat, was filed on December 2, 2008 by two NGOs devoted to good governance and weeding out corruption against Bongo, Obiang, and Sassou-Nguesso. This case differed from the others, however, in that a Gabonese citizen (Gregory Ngbwa Mintsa -- ref A, para 9) joined in this suit in an individual capacity. Blevin said that his participation in the suit was one of the straw's that broke the camel's back; the GOG could tolerate NGO lawsuits but not one that included a Gabonese citizen. Libreville viewed this as a form of opposition that bordered on treasonous or seditious behavior.

[1](#)4. (C) The second straw that helped push the GOG over the edge, Blevin said, was an open letter distributed on the internet by Bruno Ben Moubamba. This letter strongly and directly criticized GOG corruption and asked pointedly what good Bongo had really done for Gabon. Some of the five dissidents arrested and then released on January 12 were,

according to Blevin, associated with Moubamba or agreed with his letter, as described ref A, para 6.

15. (C) Gabon harbored suspicions about France's role, Blevin said, but these suspicions were largely based on a misunderstanding of the French judicial system. The Gabonese did not understand that in France, anyone can file a suit against anyone. Eventually, the vigorously independent French courts, sometimes on their own motion, would dismiss a frivolous or defective case, as happened with the first two corruption suits. Blevin said that the Gabonese, on the other hand, believed that even allowing suits of this type to be filed demonstrated implicit GOF support for the suit, which, Blevin stressed, was not at all the case.

16. (C) Having shifted into high gear, the Gabonese then denied a visa to a French lawyer who wanted to defend one of those arrested in Gabon. Blevin said that the GOF, since this friction arose, had wanted to avoid direct involvement in the case, and did not, at all costs, want to be seen as trying to manipulate Gabon's internal management of the case. France had simply advised Gabon to respect everyone's rights and to follow Gabon's own laws and procedures. Blevin did say that France had tried to "facilitate" such matters as the lawyer's visa, in an effort to lower tensions. Blevin expressed appreciation for the demarche Embassy Libreville carried out on January 12, which was consistent with the message the French wanted to send.

17. (C) Blevin said that France had also suggested to the Gabonese that their reaction to the corruption allegations tended to make the dissidents' claims more credible.

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Moreover, this "overreaction" did not reflect well in terms of Gabon's adherence to human rights, free speech, rule of law, and good governance principles. Blevin speculated that French criticism, along with that of the U.S. and others, may have helped convince the GOG to release the prisoners, even if only on bail, and to adopt a less aggressive posture.

18. (C) Blevin regretted the emergence of the spat, which he said was counter to the otherwise good relations between France and Gabon.

19. (C) Blevin was not able to provide information on recent press reports that FM Kouchner, even after taking office, had sought to collect fees from certain parties (including Gabon) that were owed to several enterprises with which Kouchner was associated prior to becoming Foreign Minister. Kouchner has stated that he did nothing improper; Blevin said that the fact that one of the parties involved was allegedly the government of Gabon had not become a bilateral issue, although he could not predict where the claims about Kouchner would go.

STAPLETON